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# The Pursuit of the Lucky Clew

By the author of "Nicholas Carter"

(Continued)

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE MAN OF THE CAB.

Just as the doctor was about to raise the lid of box number thirty-two, his task was interrupted by the tingling of a small bell.

It rang three distinct times, stopped and rang again.

It was a signal.

The doctor left his place hurriedly, and opening the door, passed out into the cemented corridor. From the clicks of locks he might have been heard opening the two other doors that intersected the passageway. Finally, when he returned he was followed by a man who did not look unlike himself.

"You are late, Franklin," was the doctor's first remark, as the two men entered.

"A little," came the reply; "I've lost track of that lobster again. He's as slippery as an eel. I can't understand why that hat pin didn't work. You dipped the point yourself, and I am certain it penetrated at least half an inch."

"That was enough."

"Then why did it fail?"

"He didn't seem to feel the stab, did he?"

He didn't wince."

"The stuff works all right. It can't be felt. The cocaine deadens the nerves."

"But why did it fail?" asked the other.

"I was with him last night when he should have died," said the doctor. "He was the healthiest looking corpse I ever laid my eyes on."

"He must be the very devil himself!"

"No, he is simply a man possessed of a trifle more brains than either of us. He has invented an antidote for all poisons. Why, I'd give half my life to be in possession of that secret. It's worth a fortune in itself. I watched him closely from the time he entered the Union League until he left, and I did not see him take anything. The only way I can account for his power over the poison is by self-hypnotism. He's a wonder"

"What's the matter with this?" inquired the new-comer, indicating the undertaker, who still lay unconscious upon the floor.

"Fainted," said the doctor, briefly. "Thirty-two coughed and it knocked him out."

"Then he knows?"

"Of course, he knows. I shouldn't have brought the thing here, but I thought it was safer than in my own cellar."

"Speaking of cellars reminds me. Your cellar—in fact, your entire house was searched just after you left this morning."

"By the police?"

"No, by our friend."

"Who let him in?"

"The servant."

"Did he simply demand admittance?"

"Oh, no, he knows his business. Why, the girl wouldn't have let him in under those circumstances."

"How do you know it was Carter?"

"The bluff was too thin, and again he answered by description. I arrived just after he had left. He came in uniform, with a book under his arm, and displayed an official card of the gas company. He went into the cellar to examine the meter, and when he came upstairs he said that there was something out of order with it, and that it would be necessary for him to examine all the burners. Well, that took him into every room of the house."

"He went to a lot of trouble for nothing," said the doctor. "He ought to know me better than that. Excuse me a minute while I give thirty-two another smell of this."

As the doctor raised the lid and proceeded to hold a small bottle to the nose of an apparent dead woman, his companion said:

"Doc, I'm beginning to get shaky. I'm afraid we're going to get tripped up on this deal. How in the devil are you going to get out of it?"

"My dear fellow, there are ways and ways"—the doctor was unwrapping a small bandage from the finger of the supposed corpse as he spoke. "Ah, the wound is healing. Bill's tooth marks will soon be obliterated. By the way, you made a fearful bungle of the ring. What in the name of common sense you wanted to hock that for I don't know. Why didn't you wait until you heard from me?"

"Pooh!" said the other. "They couldn't trace me to save their necks. I know the longer I kept it the harder it would be to get rid of. I blackened my hair, beard and eyebrows with mascaro, put on my frock coat and silk hat, and, by goodness, they wouldn't know me now if they were to fall over me. But you haven't told me what you are going to do with thirty-two."

"Marry her."

"Why, you old fool! Do you think that you could take that woman to your home and live with her without being discovered? Donelson, you're a bigger ass than I first suspected. If you had been decent about the thing, you might have had her. What you should have done was to have told the truth about the case when you saw her in her home, after the other man had pronounced her dead. If you had spoken right out then and said: 'No, this woman is not dead; she is in a cataleptic state' you would have made your fortune with the statement. As it is, you've made a sad mess of things."

"I can take her away; I can take her to some distant country where the police cannot follow me; I will take her there; I will begin life over again; I will be decent and upright; and she will love me; she will learn to love me I have always loved her."

"It's a dirty piece of business, but you've got just one of two planks to walk, old man," said Franklin. "You can give her up to her people and tell them that you discovered her in the hands of some body snatchers, and that you rescued her from them as they were about to dispose of her; you can put the job on Blackleg Bill and all will be well. The other way out is there in that hole under the marble table. She's unconscious. She could be dropped into that and never suffer a second. Now you can take your choice. As for me, I tell you once more, I'm getting shaky. I did my last piece of work for you last night in that cab. I'm done. I'm going to get out of this thing while I have time. You can stick to the ship and sink with it if you want to, but as for me I'm done."

"See here, Franklin, if you mention another word about desertion I'll expose you"

"You talk like a man up a tree!" laughed Franklin. "You would expose me, eh?"

"Don't tempt me too far!"

"If you dared to breathe a word against me I'd have your delighted company when the trap was sprung, and it isn't very often that the sheriff has the pleasure of stringing up a physician and a body snatched together."

"Take care," the doctor warned him, quietly.

"You seem to forget that Blackleg Bill is still under the impression that you were with him in the vault. We don't look unlike, do we, doc? Of course, Bill was drunk, but even the word of a drunk might go in court in such a case as this."

Before the man could utter another word the doctor's arm shot out and his clinched hand had dealt his companion a terrific blow upon the right temple. Franklin fell to the floor in a heap.

The doctor looked at him a moment, then laid a hand over his heart.

The undertaker moved slightly.

The doctor quickened his movements.

Taking the little bottle once more from his pocket, he held it to the undertaker's nose. This done, he returned to the other prostrate form. He bent over it and rapidly divested the man of his clothing until in a short time the man lay naked.

The marble top table was moved aside; the lid of the tray was raised, and another man had met his doom.

The doctor returned to the clothes and removed all articles from the pockets. The buttons were next torn off and placed upon a nearby box. Then, taking the clothing, he went over to a corner of the room.

Here he opened a small door and exposed a stove. A fire was quickly made and the garments were soon a pile of hot ashes.

He closed the little door again.

Upon the opposite side of the room he opened another small door. An electric hammer was exposed. Beneath this he placed the buttons, and soon they were dust, and a dust so fine that a test might say it was that of bone.

The papers and a pocketbook which the man had carried were carefully searched. Some greenbacks and loose change the doctor inserted in his pocket. The papers and books were thrown into the fire and the door was closed again.

He went over to the trap once more and raised it. In the vat nothing could be seen but a dark liquid. The body had dissolved.

He turned a crank inside the cement door and the fluid remains of Franklin started on their way to the river.

Every vestige of the man, who, a moment before had been happy in the flush of life, was gone, and another mystery would sooner or later be upon the hands of the police.

The doctor bent over the undertaker, and after a few minutes of work had revived him.

"What's the matter?" was McFarlan's first question.

"Why you were trying to move the marble top and slipped. I guess you struck the back of your head rather hard. You'll be all right now. Just give me a hand and we'll put the table where it belongs."

The undertaker rose slowly to his feet. Together they replaced the iron-bound table.

"I had an awful dream," said the undertaker, vaguely. "I thought we had made a mistake and had buried a woman alive. Or was it that the corpse returned to life? It was like a miracle. You were in the dream, doc. You seemed to be Satan himself."

"I suppose I had horns and a tail?" the doctor laughed.

"You had. My God, that must have been a hard fall!" And the undertaker rubbed his head. "There isn't a lump there," he said.

The doctor put his hand upon the place. "So I notice. This stuff here is wonderful," he went on as he displayed a bottle of liquid to the undertaker. "It's my own invention. It works like well-oiled machinery. You will feel no after-effects whatsoever from your tumble."

"I'm pretty shaky, though. Let's go have a drink," he suggested.

"I'll go you. I think I need one in my business about this time. Let the lights alone. We'll be back in a half hour at most, and I want to cut up thirty-two."

Scarcely had they closed the door than there was a movement in the room they had left. The figure of a man, seeming to come from nowhere into space, was seen to move rapidly here and there. He tried the lock of the door, but found it too secure to be opened quickly. He glanced about the room, and finally his eyes rested upon the hole in the ceiling, through which the air made its way out.

"That's the queerest scheme I ever saw in my life," he said. "A place for the air to get out and no place to get in!"

He looked all about him—beneath the shelves and at the sides of the boxes.

"Why, according to my way of reasoning, if that fan is kept going at its present rate, pumping fresh air out of here, the place ought to be as good as a suicide by this time."

He went from box to box and raised each lid that was not fastened down.

At length he opened one and exclaimed: "Ah so that's the trick! They keep their oxygen in cans and open it as they need it. Why, they've got this worked out to a finish. Well, if I can't get out of the door, and the air inlet is a lot of tin cans—the hole there in the ceiling is the only thing left me."

From one of the boxes he removed a rubber blanket such as are used in undertaking establishments, and with his penknife he cut this into strips. There were six small strips and one large one when he had finished his cutting.

From his pocket he took a ball of cord.

The largest strip was tied to his coat, about the lower portion of his back, being knotted in front. The smaller strips were fastened to his knees, hands and the soles of his shoes.

This done, he mounted the shelves.

From the box nearest the ceiling he found that he could extend nearly the entire length of his body into the air exit.

Quickly he descended, and gathering together a number of lengths of webbing that lay in a corner of the room, he tied them together securely.

The lid of number thirty-two was pried open. The pulseless body of a girl was tenderly lifted out.

The webbing was put beneath her arms and fastened at the back. She was lifted upon the box beneath the air outlet, and there she was left, while the man started to worm his perilous way to the roof through the hole.

The rubber strips about his body kept him from slipping back as he worked onward and upward.

After an almost endless time the man had reached the roof, and with a strength

born of his wonderful courage, he pulled upon the webbing, lifting his precious burden until it was beside him in safety.

When the doctor and undertaker returned they were dumfounded to find two coffin lids open. One was that of number thirty-two, the other they had supposed to be hermetically sealed.

Both coffins were empty!

## CHAPTER VIII. AN INTERRUPTED CLEW.

In Nick Carter's mail on Tuesday morning there had come this letter from his New York office:

"MY DEAR CHIEF: Your cipher telegram received. I think the plan will work out all right. I have ordered the dead box you described. I can use an ordinary stock box, so long as it has a knothole with a movable knot in it. I can put a small screw eye in this knot and work it when I please. I have written the letter to the undertaker. Patsy has agreed to attend to the shipment. So everything looks cheerful—even the prospect of a trip to Philadelphia as a corpse. The box, by the way, cannot be opened from the outside except with a pickaxe, and I hardly think the undertaker would be so suspicious as to venture that far. Leave the undertaker to me. I will meet you some time—Tuesday—that is, to-night—or, Wednesday, at your hotel. Of course, I cannot predict just when I can make my escape. But trust me and go about your business as if the thing were already done.

"Good luck to you.

From

CHICK."

The detective's mind was more at ease as he laid down the letter. He knew that Chick could safely be trusted to perform his allotted task.

So now, with the undertaker virtually taken care of by his able assistant, Nick Carter turned his attention to another phase of the problem.

He visited the home of Dr. Donelson, in the hope of finding something there of importance, but came away disappointed. There was not the trace of anything in the house, and in the uniform of a gas company employee he had searched it thoroughly, to give him the slightest information.

The house he found too well ordered and well kept. It was just such a house as might have been owned by any successful physician.

He returned to the hotel, entering the place boldly and winking at the clerk, who was a man who knew how to respect the secrets of the guests of the house.

The detective loafed until after dinner, spending most of the time in theory and speculation.

The outcome of his thinking was a trip to the Argile Cemetery, at which place he arrived about two o'clock in the afternoon. He entered the gate and sauntered through the grounds with the leisure of a man who might have come to mourn a departed friend.

The watchman, hobbling along by a path, accosted him.

"A fine day," said he.

"Beautiful."

"Were you looking for—some one?"

"A friend of mine—a woman. Her name was Herkness before her marriage. I do not recall her husband's name, but I think I would know it if I saw it."

"How long ago was she buried?"

"Within two years. I have been abroad and heard indirectly of her death. I could not find out just when she was buried, but I know that she was alive when I left the country—that was about two years ago."

"There have been thirty-three persons buried here since January of last year, counting the one that's coming to-day," said the old man, who had a memory for dates and figures. "If you have time I will go over the graves with you, if you say you would know the name at sight. All have some kind of stones over them, with names on them."

"I will pay you well for your trouble," said the detective.

"It is my duty, sir, to be courteous to all comers. I could not accept pay for my services other than what the company allows me."

"But a gift—a small gift—say five dollars?"

"Ah! a gift? That is different," and with the note in his possession he led the way, reading names and dates as he came to each grave in turn. But the great detective merely shook his head. Thus one by one nearly every gravestone was read and dismissed, and at last Nick Carter said:

"It must have been some other cemetery. I thank you for your trouble and kindness."

"No trouble at all, sir—no trouble. I wish I could have as much to do every day," and he ran his hand down into his pocket to see that the five dollar note was there.

Upon leaving the cemetery the detective sauntered slowly around its four sides, scanning the ground very carefully. When he had reached the Broad Street boundary he paused. Going to the curbstone he glanced at the macadamized street. His eyes moved across the thoroughfare from the point where he stood to the opposite side, and thence up to a sign on a vacant old house. The sign read:

"FOR SALE—MacDonald & Marvey, Agents."

He crossed the street and climbed the terrace steps until at last he had reached the porch front of the old mansion. He tried the knob of the door, to find it securely locked.

He walked entirely around the house, inspecting it closely, and at the same time scanning every inch of ground about it. He stood upon the rear porch and listened intently. There were no sounds within the house.

Taking a small jimmy from his pocket, he pried open one of the shutters, and, raising the window, stepped inside.

He closed the shutter again and lowered the window. He was in utter darkness.

His pocket lamp was brought into play—it was a new one, a small electric lamp that lighted with the pressure of a tiny button on its side.

He flashed it about the room.

The place was empty.

He examined the floor. It was so unusually clean that it excited his suspicion. In one corner of the room there was a pile of dust and earth, as if it had but recently been swept there. The marks of the broom were plainly evident.

The pile of dirt and dust was closely examined, and the detective found it to be made up of dried clay and gravel, together with the ordinary dust that might have accumulated in the room.

A footstep upon the porch interrupted the sleuth.

Someone tried the door, then rapped upon it.

"Hello in there!" came a voice from the outside.

"Hello yourself," said the detective.

"Open the door."

"What for?"

"Open the door."

Nick Carter put his hand upon his revolver and slid the bolt. A policeman

stuck his head in at the opening. Nick, realizing who it was, changed his attitude.

"Oh, it's an officer, eh? Come right in, patrolman; come right in."

The officer entered.

"I saw you coming around the house here and I thought that mebbe something was wrong. I ought to be ashamed to tell it, but I've a suspicion that this old shanty is haunted."

"I think you are right," said Nick Carter, as a smile played about the corners of his mouth. "The place is haunted, but they are a kind of spirits that I'd like to lay my hands on."

"Well, do you know, for a year or more, every time I've been on this beat at night I've heard noises about the place. I'd be walking over the pavement, and all of a sudden I'd hear a thump, thump, thump, like another man behind me. I'd turn around and there wasn't a soul to be seen. Then I wasn't sure it was behind me; it seemed in front of me and beside me and beneath me; but I couldn't see a thing. I knew I'd be laughed at if I reported the matter, so I just set it down to ghosts. Who may you be?"

"I'm from the cemetery company."

"And what are you doing here?"

"I'm trying to account for thirty-two empty graves," was the startling reply of the detective.

The officer opened the door wider—the daylight that entered made him a little braver—and gave him a better chance to scan the face of his companion. He looked carefully at Nick Carter, who smiled agreeably in return.

"You don't look like a lunatic," he said at last, as if he were trying to convince himself.

"I hope not," said Nick, with a laugh. "Officer, I'm going to win you a promotion. I'm going to explain the thumps you have heard for a year or more—in fact, if you were on the beat about here on the night of June 29, 1901, you would have heard the first thump."

"You puzzle me, I do declare!"

"If you are quick at figures, follow me closely. Mrs. Mary Ann Greating died on June 26, 1901. She was buried two days later, or June 28th; her body was out of its grave before June 30th. Do you follow me?"

"I remember her. She was a good woman, and Father Menahan said that such as her went into the Kingdom of Heaven. So it was her a-walking around me in the invisible air?"

"Not exactly. You don't quite follow. Let me try another tack. See this pile of dust and dirt here in the corner? Examine it closely. What would you make of it?"

"Why, that's clear, isn't it? Somebody has been in this room since the rain of Sunday and they've tracked in a lot of mud and then swept it up."

"That sounds reasonable, but I'm sorry that you are not quite right in your guess. Let's open a window and get more light. There," said Nick, as he threw open the shutters. "Now let's look at this again. You see some very dark-red gravel there, don't you? Feel it. It is damp. Now here is some clay. Yellow clay and green; all rather damp. Over in the cemetery across the street they have dug a new grave this morning. If you will go over there and examine the earth the spades of the gravediggers have thrown up, you will find a very dark-red gravel, a yellow and a green clay."

"I see! I see!" ejaculated the officer. "One of them gravediggers has been sleepin' in this room and he's tracked the gravel and clay all the way across the street."

Nick Carter looked discouraged.



"You're a clever officer," he said, but he did not mean it. "My dear fellow," he began kindly, "I have gone no further in this house than the room we are in. If you don't believe that, look at the doors that open out from it. They are all heavily padlocked, and every lock is a trifle dusty. I haven't touched one of them, and yet I can sit here, on this floor, where I am at present, and can tell you some strange things about other portions of this house which I have not seen. For instance, the cellar beneath us is so jammed up with the kind of gravel and clay that you have just examined that there is scarcely room for a man to walk in it. You will find also one or two wheelbarrows, some picks and shovels and a number of small pine boxes about the size of an ordinary shoe box."

"Oh, yes," interrupted the officer, "I see the whole thing now. It's used as a storeroom by these shoe people over here." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder, toward the rear of the house.

"What shoe people?"

"Why, the shoe company that owns the little house down at the Fifteenth Street end of this lot."

"Do they sell shoes there?"

"No, they use it as a storehouse. Their place of business is downtown somewhere. The place is always filled up with boxes, and they just send up for a wagon load every now and then as they need them."

Nick Carter was smiling again.

"Have a cigar, officer?" he said. "Hold on!—not that one," he continued, as he replaced it in his pocket. "That was given to me last night and I'm saving it. Here, have this one."

"It's on the quiet, you know," said the patrolman as he lit his own and passed the match.

"Officer, you've solved my problem. The thing that worried me was how they disposed of the bodies."

"What bodies?"

"The thirty-one that have been removed from the cemetery. There are thirty-one graves across the street slowly sinking."

"You mean the bodies were stolen? There was only one, to my knowledge; that was the Martin girl."

"She was the last, and I think will remain the last." Nick puffed on his cigar in silence for a moment, then he said: "From the cellar of this house two passages have been dug. One crosses under Broad Street and taps nearly every grave in the Argile Cemetery. The other passage leaves the rear of the cellar, and passing under the ground back of us, opens into the cellar of your shoe shop."

"By Gawd! if that's true, me mark is made!" said the bluecoat, jubilantly.

"You had better report the matter at once. Broad Street has a bad crack in it, and is likely to cave in at any time. As for me, I'm overdue at the office now. If you need me, call me up at the cemetery company. And, by the way," said Nick, as he reached the doorway, "you'd better take the sign down from the front of the house. The firm whose name it bears never existed."

Nick went out, closely followed by the officer, who was so anxious to report the case that he did not take time to investigate it.

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## CHAPTER IX.

### CHICK IN A CORNER.

It was nearly midnight on Tuesday when Chick Carter and his human theft had reached the roof of the undertaker's place, and had any peering eyes caught a glimpse

of the two figures there might have been a hue and cry raised in the street below.

A tall, muscular man in his shirt sleeves was looking over the edge of the roof, while near at hand, with his coat as a pillow, lay a beautiful young woman dressed in the shimmering white of a bride. Anon, a gentle breeze lifted the edge of her veil and played about the golden hair whose waving folds adorned her head.

Near by there lay a pile of webbing, filled with knots; a webbing that perhaps had helped many a pine box into six feet of earth, but had at last come to a more worthy use—that of lifting the dead to life.

"I can't exactly get my bearings," said Chick to himself. "We must be on top of the rear portion of the house. Down there is a back street, and on two sides of us I can look into an alleyway, seventy feet below. The space between the houses is a good twelve feet. My dear madam," he continued, as he politely addressed the apparently lifeless girl, "It seems to me that we are in a pretty pickle. But still it is much more comfortable to breathe God's fresh air, and smile hopefully up at the stars of heaven, than to be cooped up in a coffin!" Chick scratched his head. "There's a fire escape down in this alley here, but it's got a slanting roof over it."

If Chick had listened carefully he might have heard a low whistle somewhere down in that very alley. A man was making his way upward step by step on that fire escape.

Chick was peering over the edge of the roof again into the little street.

"I wonder what time it is?" he asked himself. "You haven't a watch, madam, have you? Of course you haven't! I don't suppose the men who removed you from the vault have left a scrap of jewelry behind them. Well, it must be past midnight. The street is deserted. There's a carriage standing in front of a house a block above here. By jingo, that cabby must have seen me! He's making frantic motions with his head." Chick drew back from the edge. "That won't do. He'll have the police onto me in a minute."

Again the low whistle sounded—this time higher up in the alley. It might have been the chirp of a belated sparrow seeking a shelter for the night.

But this time Chick's ear had caught the sound, and he echoed the whistle in reply.

He rose quickly, and lying down full length upon his stomach, he looked down toward the fire escape.

He whistled again.

His whistle was answered.

Once more he arose, and going to the pile of webbing he fastened one end of it to the chimney and slowly paid out the other end.

Soon a dark form made its way up to the roof, hand over hand, upon the improvised rope.

"Have a cigar," was his first remark, as he stood beside Chick. "This is a nice, lonely place, and we couldn't find a better one in which to exchange our experiences."

Nick Carter had come to the rescue.

"I knew you wouldn't desert me," cried Chick, joyfully, as he lit the cigar his chief had given him. "Let's sit here and talk it over."

"How is she?" asked the detective, indicating the beautiful young girl who was resting near at hand.

"Still unconscious."

"I knew you would get her—because she wasn't anywhere else. But tell me all about it. We'll get her down into the carriage afterward."

And Chick had soon related his story to his chief just as it has been told to the

reader, and in return Nick Carter explained his entire movements since he had left New York.

"But the doctor?" Nick asked. "You say he left the embalming room intending to return in half an hour? Then he must have returned by this time?"

"And found two empty boxes."

Nick arose, and going over to the air hole that protruded through the roof, he bent his head and listened.

"Just as I suspected!" he said, at last. "Come here and listen." Chick obeyed. The undertaker became frightened and rushed out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Up through the air hole came the physician's voice in heartrending appeal for help. The listeners heard:

"For God's sake, let me out! Let me out, I say!" There was a pause in the cries, and the two men on the roof heard the imprisoned doctor pound upon the iron door. "Turn on the lights! I'm in hell here! The boxes are all opening! The dead are coming back to haunt me with their mangled bodies!" There was another fearful cry—and silence.

"I guess I'd better drop in on the doctor," said Nick, thoughtfully. "It's an odd hour for a social call, but the doctor has been a pretty decent sort of chap in odd moments, and we've become more or less friendly in the past two days. I don't think he would mind me if I broke the conventions and passed a pleasant few minutes with him. You see, I promised to hang the doctor, and I know he will be greatly disappointed if I should fail to keep my word. And here's a cigar he gave me last night at the League. He may be able to use it where he is going. I think Satan would be glad to have the sulphur it contains. He might be able to use it in his business."

The webbing was dropped down into the hole and the great detective began his descent.

Chick had given his chief a minute description of the embalming room in which he soon found himself, so that, despite the utter darkness, he was able to make his way about among the shelves and boxes with little difficulty.

The first thing that greeted the doctor's eyes as he turned his attention from the door was a small red light down at the opposite end of the room. He braced himself, and drawing a revolver, fired. The light disappeared. When the echoes of the shot had died away a voice broke the silence:

"Pretty fair shot, doc," it said, "but the trouble was that the cigar was not in my mouth. I had fastened it upon the end of this broom. The ball struck the handle and did a little damage to the tiling on this wall back of me."

"Where did you come from?" demanded the agonized physician.

"That isn't a very pleasant way to greet a friend. I just dropped in on business."

"One of us won't get out alive!" cried the doctor, madly.

Nick Carter was still the calm, composed man he ever was.

"It would be a shame," he said, "the sick public needs such clever physicians as you. Have a cigar. No? Why, it's a good one. You gave it to me yourself."

The answer was another shot.

"That was pretty close," said Nick. "I heard that piece of lead singing 'The Last Rose of Summer' as it sailed by. Try the next a trifle to the left."

Bang! came another shot.

"Ah! that was excellent! The only trouble was that I had moved—slightly."

Something whizzed through the darkness and, striking the detective upon the chest, fell to the cement floor and broke into a hundred pieces.

"That wasn't at all gentlemanly," said Nick. "Why you might have put my

eyes out of commission with that acid. It struck me on the chest, and as my coat is quite dry at that place, I naturally concluded that you threw it in such haste that you forgot to draw the cork."

Another shot put a period to the detective's remark.

"You had better throw the revolver; you're a much better shot with your hand than you are with your gun."

Another flash lighted up the darkness for a second, and a bullet flattened itself against the tiled wall.

"That was thoughtless of you, doctor. You should have saved your last shot for a more certain opportunity. Lead is worth more than all the gold in the world—if our lives depend on it."

"Well, what are you going to do with me?"

"As long as you are locked in here and can't get out, I think you will be quite safe until I can go around the front way and let the police in."

"But if there's a way for you to get out there is a way for me."

"Not exactly!"

"The air hole!" cried the doctor.

"I have a man at the top."

"Ha!" grunted the doctor.

"But I might suggest that if you were to arrange matters with me I might keep quiet and you would be drawn up. I have signals with my assistant, but he wouldn't know the difference until you had reached the roof. That would so take him by surprise that you could tip him into the street before he had fully recovered."

"One of us will reach that air hole—first!" cried the doctor, and before the detective had foreseen the move the man was upon him.

The maddened physician seemed to have superhuman power, and it was nip and tuck in the darkness for life or death.

Over and over the two men rolled; now the doctor seemed to have the mastery of the situation, again Nick Carter had forced his man beneath him.

The physician's grip at the detective's throat had not weakened, and Nick Carter felt himself being slowly strangled to death.

The detective was now the under man. The strong knees of the doctor pressed heavily against the flattened arms of the sleuth and the grip at the throat grew tighter.

Suddenly the detective brought his knee against his adversary's back with such force that it sent him sprawling on the cemented floor.

Nick Carter was quick to grasp his opportunity and in another moment had risen only to fall with his full weight upon his foe.

"It was man to man!" he hissed in the physician's ear, "and the best man has won. Your days are numbered, my fine thief of the dead. You have shut yourself in your own trap. When I return I will bring the strong arm of the law with me—the arm on which hangs the hand that will twine the cord for your neck."

The detective sprang upon the nearby shelf and ran to the rope which dangled down the air hole, but just as he had given the signal to Chick, he heard the gasp of a strangling man in the room he was about to leave.

He flashed his pocket lamp about, and there, in the center of the cemented floor, he saw a sight that he will never forget.

The doctor, in trying to get down into the vat, had been caught between the falling door and the floor, and there he hung suspended by the throat.

"So," said Nick, "you have chosen to weave your own rope? It saves the sheriff some expense."

But the words fell on ears already deaf.

*(To be Continued)*